The Southern Version of Cursor Mundi, Vol. V

Eldredge, Laurence M., Klinck, Anne L.

Published by University of Ottawa Press

Eldredge, Laurence M. and Anne L. Klinck.
The Southern Version of Cursor Mundi, Vol. V.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/6611

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=149096
The case for this John Beawmys of Lindbergh and his heirs as commissioners of MS G is far from proven, but in the absence of a better candidate, they stand as possible commissioners of the work.

Little is known of the later history of the manuscript. Marginal notes indicate that it remained in England for some time. A few Middle English proverbs and recipes appear in late-fifteenth- and early-sixteenth-century hands, and running headlines of the same era appear on the early folios. Two names appear on fol. 123v, Annes Lopton and Dorathe Darlyngton. Lopton or Lipton is a Yorkshire name and suggests that the manuscript had a continuing Yorkshire connection. Other folios contain English glosses in a hand which is quite late, perhaps even eighteenth century. However, a note on the flyleaf records in German that the manuscript was purchased at auction in Hannover on June 14, 1786, and it has remained in Germany ever since. A bookplate on the flyleaf bears the signature C. I. Sullon.

Overwhelmingly, then, the evidence available in extant manuscripts suggests that CM circulated almost exclusively in lay circles, predominantly among merchants and landed gentry.

**DECORATION**

A major problem with a poem as long as CM is to orient the reader in the text, to help him find his way around it easily. In its original form, now most clearly seen in MSS E and C, the poem was not frequently broken up by headings or chapter divisions. However, even the earliest and plainest of the manuscripts have, or were intended to have, some sort of visual aids to guide the reader to a certain story.

The programme of rubrication in MS E was never carried out. Although the sections of the manuscript containing part of the Northern Homily Cycle have many headings in red, the portion of the manuscript containing the CM has none. Spaces were left for headings, however, on fol. 37r, 3v, 10r, and 14r, and spaces for decorated initials were left on fol. 14r and 47r. A late hand, possibly seventeenth-century, has jotted headings or running headlines on some of these folios, and these were printed by Morris as if they were original headings in text columns.
Although it has red initials to indicate divisions of the poem, MS C does not contain headings in the text. However, many folios, especially at the beginning of the manuscript, show running headlines, which again Morris has printed as headings in the text. Presumably more of these once existed but were cropped by a binder.

MS F has initials and paragraph marks in red, but few headings. The scribe of this manuscript has, however, greatly facilitated the consultation of the text by providing a table of contents with 90 numbered items. These chapter numbers are keyed to red numbers at the top of folios (fols. 5r and 5v are marked i, fol. 6r ii, etc.), and the headings from the table of contents are often repeated as marginal notes beside the appropriate lines. Later users of the manuscript have also jotted further marginal notes in it.

MS G also has a table of contents, copied in red, on fol. 1r. This lists the contents of the manuscript, but its wording is not directly reflected in headings or marginal notes in the manuscript itself. MS G, however, also has an elaborate scheme of decoration which will be discussed later.

The layout of the edition of the southern version of the poem was originally planned to make finding one's way around the work easier. The extant witnesses which most closely reflect this original layout are MSS H and T. This version of the work has many more rubricated headings inserted into the text than any of the others. Red and blue paragraph marks abound in MS T, and are represented in MS H by double slashes in the margin. A sixteenth-century reader of MS T has also heavily annotated the margins.

MSS L and B continue the use of the headings of the southern version and have many initials and paragraph marks in red and blue. MS L also has a table of contents. The scribe has simply listed the headings which appear in the manuscript and has indicated the page on which each may be found. This table of contents appears before the poem, on a single leaf of paper (fol. 65) with a different watermark from the paper on which the rest of CM is copied. The table of contents probably did not, therefore, come to the scribe with the poem, but was added as an afterthought by him to make location of specific parts of the poem easier.

Robert Thornton, who copied MS Add, left spaces for more headings than are found in MS F, the nearest textual relative to his own copy.
He also decorated his text with red initials, probably penned by his own hand.

Aside from these pragmatic schemes to facilitate reading of the text, however, almost all the manuscripts of \textit{CM} show at least vestiges of a more ambitious programme of decoration. The southern version appears to have been issued in a rather handsome format, on parchment, with generous margins. MS H now contains two fairly elaborate initials painted with gold, one at the beginning of the section of the creation of the world (fol. 1v), and one at the beginning of the Passion narrative (fol. 87v), reproduced in vol. 3, p. xxi of the present edition. Others may have appeared on missing leaves in the manuscript.

MS T, while it does not have painted decoration, has fairly elaborate penwork initials in red and blue with a design of ivy leaves and a border on fols. 1r and 92v, again at the beginning of the poem, and at the opening of the Passion story. MS L has a less elaborate initial, in red and blue with some gold, at the beginning of the poem (fol. 66r), and only MS B shows no attempt at such decoration.

A more intriguing feature of \textit{CM} manuscripts, however, is the indication given by four of them (ECGAdd) that they were intended to be decorated not simply with ornamental initials, but with some sorts of pictures or representational devices. This is very rare in manuscripts of Middle English texts before the beginning of the fifteenth century, and even after that period only a narrow range of vernacular texts is ever illustrated.

MS E, dated by Neil Ker at the beginning of the fourteenth century (Ker, p. 539), contains three spaces in its text columns which seem to have been intended to hold pictures. On fol. 39v col. 2, a space of 14 lines has been left at the beginning of the story of Paul’s conversion (before l. 19477). On fol. 41r col. 1, a space of 12–13 lines has been left before a section telling of God sending Ananias to baptize the still blind Paul (before l. 19657). On fol. 46v col. 1, a space of seven lines has been left in the middle of a discussion of the cross (before l. 21717). The first space occurs at a place which the other manuscripts regard as a significant division of the poem, and the second occurs at a minor division, but the third occurs at a place where no other manuscripts note a division.
There seems little reason for picture spaces to appear at just these places. St. Paul was never a popular saint with the laity, and histories of Christian iconography record relatively few representations of him. It is possible that the commissioner of the manuscript had a special devotion to St. Paul. He is the patron saint of rope makers and of basket makers but the scenes which inspired this are not the ones which were chosen for illustration here. His blinding and conversion are clearly an important moment in his story, and in the history of the Church, but his baptism and the regaining of his sight are much more rarely shown. The 6000 lines preserved in MS E would have allowed an artist to illustrate other more commonly shown events: the story of Simon Magus from the life of Peter and Paul, for instance, figures of the apostles to accompany their biographies, the Assumption of Our Lady, Antichrist, the Apocalypse, the Fifteen Signs before Judgement, hell, heaven, etc. Yet these were ignored and the story of Paul apparently given two spaces.

The third picture space, on fol. 46v col. 1, is both smaller (seven lines, or half the size of the others) and easier to explain. It occurs just after a mention of a tau cross:

Staue and er croice bajpe er als an
Bot taue hauis gierd abou nan.

To the left of the space is a crude tau, presumably a direction to the artist what to draw in the space.

This kind of illustration, not a scene but a drawing of a simple device, also appears in the margins of the next oldest manuscript of the poem, MS C, and may have been copied from its exemplar. The manuscript contains a series of marginal drawings in the hand and ink of the scribe, labelled in Latin. The first occurs at the bottom of fol. 7v. It is a simple diagram of the rivers of Paradise, a circle divided into quarters, each one containing a name of one of the rivers, with the whole labelled quatuor flumen paradisi. The folio contains a description of Paradise.

The second, at the bottom of fol. 12v, is a drawing of a ship labelled archa noe. The ship has not been abstracted or simplified from a more complete Noah's ark scene, for it shows none of the usual attributes of the ark. It is not enclosed, there are no signs of the window and door mentioned in Genesis, and there are no people, animals, or birds nearby.
The third drawing is at the bottom of fol. 13v. The text tells of the division of the world among the sons of Noah and the sketch is a T-O map dividing the world into Asia, Europe, and Africa. The label reads *divisio terrarum tribus fratribus* *Iaphet cham* (Shem is not mentioned).

The fourth sketch, on fol. 14v, is of a tower and is labelled *Turris babilonie*.

There are no other labelled drawings in the manuscript, but a rough sketch of the tablets of Moses' law between the text columns of fol. 36v may indicate that there were others throughout the exemplar.

The evidence of the tau cross in MS E and the marginal drawings in MS C suggest that a certain kind of illustration may have appeared in the earliest copies of *CM*. The earliest manuscripts probably contained not scenes but simple drawings of single objects—a map, a ship, a tower—to mark divisions in the text and to guide a reader through a manuscript.

There are also some further spaces in the text columns of the Cotton manuscript. Originally the copyist left spaces ranging from 16 to five lines at the beginning of the histories of the first six ages of the world. Five of the six spaces are now filled with crude diagrams, in the hand and ink of the scribe, of the genealogy of the prominent men of the preceding era. The first space, on fol. 2v after 1.270, is awkward, as there is no genealogy of a preceding era to fill it. The space is instead filled, for no particular reason, with a list of days of the week and their corresponding planets.

John Thompson has suggested that these spaces too were originally intended to hold some sort of pictures to preface each of the ages of the world (Thompson, Robert Thornton, pp. 60-61). The genealogies, however, seem to have been in an early archetype of all but two of the present manuscripts, although there is slight evidence to suggest that they may not have been in the original poem.

Lines 1625-26, which end the account of the first age, announce that a genealogy will follow:

*Bot first a tre, ar .i. bigin,*
*I sal sette hire of adam kin. (MS C)*
The lines also appear in the related MSS G, H, T, and B, which announce a genealogy of Noah's kin, although no such genealogy appears. The scribe of MS L omits the lines, presumably because he noticed that no genealogy followed. The lines are also omitted, however, in MS F, which descends from a different archetype than the ancestor of all the manuscripts which preserve the lines. MS F could, of course, have omitted the lines independently, but it is also possible that this reference to a genealogy only occurs in the descendants of the exemplar of MS C.

Another anomaly occurs in the lines preceding the sixth age. MS C does not have any lines announcing a genealogy, although its last diagram occurs here on fol. 70v. After l. 12732, however, all the extant manuscripts except C have:

\[
\begin{align*}
\verb|Dis ilk tre I dede be-gyn.| \\
\text{is alle sette for mary kyn.} \\
\text{pat ilkan may knaw weterly} \\
\text{of Ioseph kin & of mary} \\
\text{for hai come bab of a man.} \\
\text{pat had leuy to his nam. (MS F)}
\end{align*}
\]

All the extant manuscripts except C then have eight lines roughly outlining the ancestry of Mary and Joseph. MS G, however, whose scribe has lately switched exemplars to follow a more northern version of the text, has, in between the announcement of the genealogy and the new lines, a five-line list of names very similar to the ones appearing in C's genealogical table. It seems reasonable to suppose that G's new exemplar had, in fact, a genealogical table like the one which remains in MS C, but that the scribe of G ignored its frame and simply copied the names.

Although the genealogies may have been present in the exemplar of C, it is not impossible that drawings, such as those preserved in C, were also present in the exemplar to mark the transition from one age of the world to another. The rivers of paradise would serve to introduce the first age, Noah's ark the second, the tablets of the law the fourth. In this scheme emblems for the third, fifth, and sixth ages are missing in MS C, and the T-O map and Tower of Babel are outside the scheme, but additional sketches might easily have been present in the exemplar or archetype.
The kind of decoration I am suggesting is not unknown elsewhere. Almanacs and calendars often represent saints pictorially by their attributes (the hand of St. Faith, for instance). They may also contain brief world histories or chronological schemes in which each age is accompanied by a suitable, though simple, pictorial representation very like those in MS C. Chronicle histories may also contain this kind of illustration, although their form is somewhat more elaborate.

It seems that the marginal drawings in MS C have been displaced from their usual spot within text columns of the manuscript, where they, and probably others like them, served as pictorial chapter headings to break up the narrative. In the same way, Elizabeth Salter and Derek Pearsall suggest that miscellaneous scenes of battle and procession “are dotted about [secular] manuscripts, more, it seems, with the intention of providing visual relief and variety, or of punctuating the narrative in a visually convenient way, than of providing a visual commentary on or interpretation of the narrative” (Salter and Pearsall, p. 103). It is notable that the northern manuscripts, including MS C, have few rubricated headings to guide the reader to the contents of particular passages. In contrast, the South Midland manuscripts of the poem, which show no signs of ever having been illustrated, have many more rubricated headings to guide the reader.

MS Add, copied by Robert Thornton, is another CM manuscript which gives some indication that its copyist thought it should be illustrated. An indeterminate amount of material is missing at the beginning of this manuscript, but the 4400 extant lines contain 10 spaces which he presumably left for pictures. His choice of material to illustrate cannot be directly compared with the choices made by the scribes of E or C, for E preserves lines from a different part of the poem, and this part of C shows no indication of illustration.

Thornton’s choices of scenes for illustration are much more conventional than the choices of the Edinburgh text. Large spaces are provided in columns to hold scenes of

- the conception of John the Baptist (fol. 4v col. 2)
- the presentation of Jesus at the temple (fol. 7r col. 2)
- the three kings and their offerings (fol. 7v col. 2)
- the angel warning the three kings (fol. 8v col. 2)
– the flight into Egypt (fol. 9r col. 2)
– Christ at school (fol. 12v col. 2)
– Christ restoring sight to the blind man (fol. 21v col. 2)
– the healing at the Piscina Probatica (fol. 23v col. 1)
– Christ forgiving Mary Magdalene (fol. 25v col. 1).

In addition, at the top of fol. 24v, space has been left for a double-column picture, probably of Christ preaching in the temple.

Of the New Testament scenes which Thornton planned to include, only one, Christ healing the blind man, is roughly comparable to a scene in the more fully illustrated MS G which will be discussed below. As MSS Add and G show almost no correlation in scenes illustrated and are not related to each other stemmatically either, it can safely be said that the Thornton and Göttingen manuscripts were not drawing on a common tradition of illustrated CM manuscripts for their work. MS F, the manuscript which is most closely related to Thornton’s textually, although it is not his exemplar, is the only northern manuscript which bears no indication of illustration at all. It seems likely, then, that the impulse to leave spaces for pictures in the manuscript came to Robert Thornton independently.

Most of the projected pictures would have shown commonly illustrated biblical scenes. The conception of John the Baptist is not a usual subject, but the visitation of Mary to Elizabeth is and this may have been what was intended here. An exception is the picture which would have shown Christ at school, a story told in the rarely illustrated apocryphal stories of the childhood of Christ. Even this could have been provided from an orthodox source, however, by adapting a standard preaching or teaching scene.

Salter and Pearsall remark about the illustration of secular romances that “the availability of appropriate compositional models is an important consideration for the professional illustrator” (Salter and Pearsall, p. 104), and Hugo Buchthal has shown how widely available biblical scenes were adapted to illustrate such secular works (Buchthal, pp. 11–13). The most likely explanation of Robert Thornton’s picture spaces is that he too planned to illustrate the CM with pictures from an illustrated Bible cycle in an unrelated text.
For unknown reasons, Thornton never filled in the picture spaces, and instead wrote in many of them. The headings are clearly an afterthought, however, as they do not correspond with headings in any of the other manuscripts, and as they occasionally duplicate other headings already in place. The heading on the picture space on fol. 4v col. 2, for instance, “Off the concepceyon off John the Baptiste,” duplicates the usual heading on fol. 5r col. 2, “Pe concepceyon of Saynt John of [sic] Baptiste.”

The most lavish programme of illustration in any CM manuscript is found in MS G. The first 96 folios of the manuscript contain quite elaborate decoration. This was almost certainly executed ca. 1375–1400 in York, where there was a flourishing trade in book production. The decoration of the manuscript stops partway through the volume, although unfortunately not at the same place that other changes occur. Only the first 97 folios of the manuscript are illustrated, in other words all but two leaves of the first eight quires. The colophon too comes in an odd position. Rather than being at the end of the poem (or even at the beginning), the name of the commissioner of the manuscript comes partway through, at l. 17099, following the story of Christ’s Passion and a 98-line passage of devotional prayer translated from Robert Grosseteste.

Unlike the illustrations planned for MSS E, C, and Add, those in MS G are connected with the initials of the poem. Eighty-eight initials receive some kind of painted ornamentation. Some are simply decorated with vines and leaves, which can extend into a border spanning as many as 22 lines. Other initials are decorated with some kind of living creatures. There are 14 birds, 11 dragons, lizards or serpents, two dogs, two human-headed grotesques, one fish, one ape, one ox, and 12 other creatures which defy classification.

An even more interesting group of initials, however, is decorated with scenes or figures directly related to the poem. These scenes are not simple marginal drawings, as in MS C, nor are they placed within columns of text, in spaces like those in MSS E and Add. The pictures are not contained within the form of the letter itself either, as in historiated initials. Rather, they extend out into the margin beside the letter. Most of the scenes are fairly small and the figures are integrated into the
design of the letter itself. In a more elaborate scene, such as David and Goliath, however, the picture moves into the margin.

As MS G holds a complete text of CM, except for some accidental losses, its scheme of decoration can be compared with those in all of the other manuscripts except E, for the decoration stops in MS G before the story of Paul. At almost no point does MS G illustrate the same scenes as appeared or were to have appeared in the other manuscripts. Of the Old Testament passages it illustrates, only one, the tablets of the law, corresponds very roughly with a drawing in MS C. Of New Testament scenes, only the healing of the blind man and perhaps Christ preaching are comparable to the scenes which would have appeared in MS Add.

Often the subjects chosen for illustration in MS G seem somewhat eccentric, and not all of the scenes are placed at major divisions of the poem. The story of the fall of Lucifer and the confirmation of the good angels in heaven opens with an initial showing an angel with a drooping wing (fol. 4r). This is not exactly a scene, but it does show an adaptation of the initial decoration to the text. The second representational scene, at the beginning of the Fall story (fol. 6v), shows a kneeling man eating part of the initial. None of the Genesis drawings from MS C appears here in MS G.

The next scene shows a kneeling Isaac being blessed by Christ, who leans out from behind the letter O (fol. 24v). Fol. 32v shows Joseph in exile and in prison, sitting in the stocks. These two are not subjects which are frequently illustrated, and the picture of Joseph appears at a point which is not seen as a major division of the poem by any other scribe. Two lines are copied in red here as if they were a heading, but these lines are treated as normal parts of the text in all the other manuscripts.

Fol. 45v shows a horned Moses, carrying the tablets of the law, being blessed by Christ, who appears from behind the initial. MS C also had a hasty sketch of the tablets of the law, but nothing in the treatment of the subject is similar.

Fol. 52v shows David and Goliath in one of the largest scenes in the manuscript. This is the only scene to be framed in any way and to have a patterned background of arabesques. Two pictures of buildings represent Solomon's Temple (fol. 60v) and the allegory of the Château d'amour (fol. 68r).
The New Testament is the only part of the CM which survives in MS Add, and is therefore the part which Robert Thornton clearly intended to have illustrated, yet the spaces in his manuscript rarely coincide with the pictures in MS G. Again, MS G's choice of subjects to illustrate is somewhat eccentric. There is no Nativity scene, for instance, but instead a picture of a man (fol. 76v). Some of the miracles of the infancy of Christ are illustrated, which is quite unusual. There is a scene of the palm tree bowing to Christ (fol. 79v) and of Jesus sowing seeds, and taming a lion (fol. 83v). The scene from the infancy gospels which was to appear in MS Add was of Christ at school, so again there is no common subject. The illustrations in MS G end with some scenes from Christ's ministry. Christ blessing the man born blind (fol. 91v) was also to appear in MS Add (fol. 21v), and there is an initial showing Christ preaching (MS G, fol. 93v), which is also the presumed subject of the double-column picture space in MS Add. Thornton's picture, though, would presumably have been much larger and surely much more elaborate. The last picture in MS G is of the dying Lazarus in front of his house (fol. 95v).

This examination of the decoration of CM manuscripts, from the simplest to the most elaborate, suggests a pragmatic approach on the part of the scribes. Simple coloured initials, paragraph marks and rubricated headings, as well as tables of contents and running headlines, are easily seen as simple devices to orient a reader in the pages of this very long poem. The most common early forms of drawings in the manuscripts were probably simple sketches of individual objects, similarly used to punctuate the text. The evidence suggests that illustrations were provided for very early in the history of the transmission of the poem. However, there is little evidence for a proto-cycle of illustrations, or even for a set of agreed places where illustrations ought to occur. The eccentric choice of subjects, and their placement at lines which are not major divisions of the poem suggest that some of the decoration at least was used to break up visually monotonous pages, rather than to indicate logical breaks in the text.

The question remains why manuscripts of CM, almost alone of fourteenth-century texts, should show so much evidence of intended illustration. The answer, I think, lies in its subject matter. Because the